DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 051 TM 013 835

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TITLE Secondary School Homework Practices: Uses and Misuses.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, March 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; High Schools; *High School Students; *Homework; Parent Conferences; Principals; *Program Evaluation; Secondary School Teachers; Student Motivation; *Study Habits; Teacher Participation
IDENTIFIERS *Homework Emphasis Program

ABSTRACT

An assessment of the Homework Emphasis Program (HEP) at a senior high school located in a mid-sized city is presented. This program is intended to increase student learning and decrease the number of failing grades by encouraging students to complete all assigned homework. HEP involves warnings to students who have not completed homework assignments; contacts with parents; referrals to the principal; teacher strategies to insure completion of homework; special early morning sessions monitored by the principal; and conferences involving parents, students, and the principal. The assessment involved structured interviews with 25 teachers, 20 students identified by the teachers as affected by the program, 20 students identified as unaffected, and 16 parents. In addition, the school principal was formally interviewed and informal meetings were conducted with school administrators. Other data were taken from the school district's Department of Management Information Data Services. Results indicate that: (1) homework did significantly influence course grades; (2) homework may actually have a negative affect on learning due to misunderstandings about its purpose and the best approach to its execution; and (3) attention should be given to preparation, extension, and creativity in the assignment and evaluation of homework assignments. (TJH)

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Secondary School Homework Practices: Uses and Misuses

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at the
Annual Meeting of the
American Research Association
in
San Francisco, 1989
Session 15.34

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Secondary School Homework Practices: Uses and Misuses

Purpose

This research project was designed to study the Homework Emphasis Program (HEP) at Skyview High School[1]. This was a program intended to increase student learning and decrease failing grades by encouraging students to complete all assigned homework. The research team sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the HEP as it was proposed and how is it actually being used by teachers?
2. What, if any, influence is the HEP having on the homework policies and practices of teachers and how are teachers reacting to the HEP?
3. What influence does the HEP program seem to be having on student homework practices and why?
4. Could this program be utilized in any high school or does Skyview High School have some particular features that make it functional?
5. What are the homework policies and practices used by teachers in this school?
6. How do the practices of teachers in Skyview relate to homework practices recommended in the literature?

Background

Skyview High School is a senior high school located in a mid-size city. It serves a multi-ethnic population of approximately 1700 students. The HEP had its beginning in the spring semester, 1986 in a pilot effort. Jane Anderson, Assistant Principal, described the spring effort in an earlier report: "...ten teachers with failure rates above 30% were involved in an experimental academic management system with the principal of Skyview High School. The ten teachers' failure rate was extremely high, basically because the students did not do their homework. The teachers were asked to share with their students that if they did not do their homework, the teacher would call their parents; then if the problem occurred again the student would be referred to the principal. The principal would then call the parents."

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1. School and individual names are fictitious.

At the end of the spring semester failing grades in the pilot classrooms had decreased. This encouraging outcome led the principal of Skyview to ask all teachers to use the HEP beginning with the fall semester, 1986. The principal introduced the program first to all the department chairpersons. At a later time it was introduced to the entire faculty at a regular faculty meeting. In this meeting the principal explained the HEP and four students and some teachers involved in the pilot test spoke to the faculty about their experiences with the program.

At the invitation of the principal our research team entered on to the scene at Skyview immediately after the end of the first six weeks of the fall semester, 1986 and collected data during the next six-week period.

Study Description

Data for this study were collected from a sample of teachers, students, parents, and school administrators. In each case the data collection technique was a personal interview based on a structured interview format. Additional data were gathered from informal meetings with school administrators and from data published by the school district's Department of Management Information Data Services.

From the departments of mathematics, science, social studies, and English a total of 25 teachers were selected for interviews. Teachers were selected from these departments for it was assumed that the greatest impact of the HEP would be in those academic areas. Each selected teacher was given an opportunity to decline the invitation to participate but none did. All interviews were conducted at the school site and they were all tape recorded for later analysis.

Each of the 25 study teachers was asked to nominate three students they thought had been affected by the HEP and three that had not. Affected students were defined as any who had been warned, had parents called, or had in any way indicated they had changed their homework behavior as a result of the program. Unaffected students were those who, in the opinion of the teacher, had not been influenced in any way by the HEP. This would include those students who always did their homework.

Letters were sent to parents of all students named by the teachers explaining the study and asking permission for them to be interviewed. Out of the large group that was granted parental permission, 40 students were

randomly chosen to be interviewed, 20 from the affected group and 20 from the unaffected group. These students were interviewed in groups of five. The groups were not mixed; all students in each interview group were from either the affected group or from the unaffected group.

When the parents were contacted to get permission for the student interviews they were asked to volunteer to be interviewed. Sixteen parents did so and all were interviewed. These interviews were conducted by telephone for the convenience of the parents.

The research study began with a formal interview with the school principal. During the course of the study we also had a number of informal conversations with him. An interview was also conducted with the associate principal. These interviews and conversations were intended to gain as much information as possible about the background and rationale for the program as well as collecting any information about outcomes that might be related to the HEP.

Findings

The findings will be presented in relation to each of the study questions stated earlier and in that order.

The Proposed Innovation

Before there can be any judgments made regarding the worth of any new program there must be a clear understanding of what the program is. This means an understanding of what the program is meant to be by those who developed it and/or have primary responsibility for facilitating it and what the users of the program interpret it to be. In the case of the HEP, the developer and primary facilitator are one and the same, the school principal. The users are the Skyview teachers.

In the fall of 1986, the principal implemented the HEP for the entire school. He did this by meeting with all faculty members, explaining the results of the trial period from the previous spring semester, and outlining the program as follows:

1. If a student does not have his/her homework on time, the teacher warns the student that if it occurs again the parents will be called by the teacher.

2. The teacher calls the parents the next time the student does not have his/her homework.
3. If a student continues not to do his/her homework, he/she is referred directly to the principal.
4. The principal calls the parents and basically indicates the following:
   a. The principal will not tolerate students not doing their homework.
   b. If the behavior continues, the student must come to school at 7:30 a.m. and report to the principal. The principal will monitor the homework.
   c. The parents and the student must have a conference with the principal if the student continues to not complete his/her homework assignments.

The innovation was then announced to the student body and repeated periodically on the public address system so that the students would become familiar with the program and understand that it was a program instituted throughout the school.

The primary reason given by the principal for instituting the program was to increase student learning and reduce the number of failing grades being made by students. His premise was that an increase in completed homework would thereby improve the student's standing in the class. The principal realized that the possibilities inherent in the program were overwhelming--that 1700 students taking five or six classes a day could result in the possibility that over 9000 calls might be needed to be made home. He was confident, however, that several factors would make the program work and that the rate of failure would be reduced. The factors that he speculated were the following:

1. The principal's introduction and backing of the program would be a strong message to the students that the program was important and that it would be enforced. Coupled with this was the negative repercussions of having parents called by the teacher or principal.
2. The interaction of the teachers, the parents, and the students would emphasize for the student how important it was to complete the homework, and the three parties working together would accomplish the goal of the program without the necessary involvement of the principal, or even repeated calls by the teacher.

3. The program would emphasize academics as the primary focus of the school, and the students would thereby concentrate more on their studies.
4. The program would encourage the teachers to become more involved with their students and particularly to become more personally involved with the students who were not doing well in their classes.

Although increasing student learning and reducing the rate of failures were the main goals, the principal speculated about other factors that might well relate to the implementation of the program. These factors involve the following:

1. The innovation might affect the environment in the school and more clearly define academic performance as the highest priority.
2. Minor behavioral problems might be reduced.
3. Students' grades might increase at all levels, in addition to raising those at the failing level.
4. Teacher morale might improve as teachers begin to feel that they are doing a better job with their students.

The principal's comments were made at the conclusion of the first grading period. At that time, he had made 19 phone calls to parents and had not had to progress to any of the other features of the program beyond calling home.

The Innovation as Implemented

The program as actually implemented by the teachers was very similar to that outlined by the principal. Many, but not all teachers reported that they were following the program and had made calls to parents. Of the teachers interviewed, only three reported referring students to the principal.

There were some variations reported by teachers. Two teachers reported methods to try to make the program somewhat more active. One said, "If I'm checking and collecting homework, I ask students who don't have it to write their phone numbers on a sheet of paper and turn it in. This way they know they are responsible for the consequences." Another said, "Every time the student's homework is incomplete or not done at all, I give them a form to fill out. They have to write a short essay on why they haven't done their homework. I only call home if they haven't done their homework at all." Some teachers reported a need to individualize the program more. One said, "I've

adhered to the program precisely, but there's one student whose parents I didn't call, even though he'd missed two assignments. In his case, I thought it best not to, and he's had his homework ever since." Other teachers reported a need for the program to be more teacher-centered. One said, "So far I haven't felt the need to send anyone to the principal. I feel it's more effective for me to handle it myself." Another said, "I believe it's important for the teacher to call home until she gets results, and only refer to the principal if necessary."

Allowing for the adaptations in the innovation it was determined that 80% of the interviewed teachers were using the program as intended. Another 12% either did not assign homework or had no need to use the steps in the HEP. Two teachers (8%) expressed a refusal to use the program.

In interviews with students who had been specifically influenced by the program as well as with students who had not been directly influenced, the reports concerning the implementation of the program were uniform. The students understood the program and reported that in most cases it was being implemented as directed by the principal. In interviews with the parents there was less understanding of the specifics of the program. The principal had announced the program at the first Back-to-School Night at the beginning of the school year. Several parents referred to this announcement and understood how the program worked and what its purpose was. Other parents had been contacted by a teacher or the principal and understood the reason for being called. In general, the parents felt like the program was an attempt for teachers and parents to communicate more directly in order to help the academic performance of the student.

In all the reports of the program from teachers, students, and parents, no one referred to the steps of the program beyond the first three: teacher warning, teacher calls parents, refer to principal. There were no references to what the principal would do if a call to the parent did not work. None referred to homework sessions before school with the principal, or conferences with the parents.

In interviews with teachers, they were asked what changes they thought needed to be made with the program in order for it to be better implemented. The following suggestions were given.

1. Some reported confusion over how the program was to work over a long period of time. Were the teachers to warn, call home, and refer to

the principal in a particular six-weeks period, then begin the process anew the next six weeks? Or were the teachers to continue sending a student to the principal over the period of a semester? The teachers felt a need for clarification as to the long term aspects of the program.

2. Several teachers reported that the program could be more effective if their class size were smaller or if there were some type of clerical help.
3. Some teachers were very positive about the program, but afraid that it would not work over a long period of time if it were not reinforced by the principal. One teacher said, "The principal must continue the focus so the teachers won't slack off." Another said, "It is good to be reminded periodically of the program because as time passes, it is easy to let it slip down the list of priorities."
4. Some teachers were concerned about the uniformity of the program. The feeling was that the program worked because all the teachers were enforcing it together, and because the principal was standing firmly behind it. To make the program clearer, some felt a need for the program to be in writing and visible for the teachers and students. One teacher said, "I should have given information on paper to my students the first day of class, then we would have been clear, and it might have saved me making some of the calls I have had to make."
5. A concern raised by teachers related to the program, but was not specifically a part of the program. This was the issue of the students who, some teachers felt, could not be influenced by the program. One teacher said, "The program does not adequately address the problem of the students who are doing so poorly that this simply makes it worse. There are some students who are being further alienated by this program, because as some students are improving, students at the very bottom level are being further set apart." One teacher was concerned that this bottom level of students was being pushed aside and because in her classes it was the Hispanic males, that the program had racial overtones that must be compensated for by another program addressing the particular needs of this group.

It can be concluded that the HEP was understood by most teachers and that it was being used in an acceptable manner by 80% of the teachers.

Although the number of suggestions teachers made for improving the program was limited they are certainly worthy of due consideration.

Changes in Homework Policies and Practices and Teacher Reactions to the HEP

This section reports on the adaptations teachers made in their homework practices in response to the HEP and the reactions of teachers to the program. The principal told the researchers that one thing he emphasized to his staff was that they should not reduce the quality or expectations of their program in response to the HEP. Therefore, it is important to know if teachers changed their homework practices and how and why they made the changes.

Out of the sample of 25 teachers, 56% reported they had not made any changes in their homework practices, while 44% reported they had changed their practices in some way. The changes teachers described have been grouped into the following categories:

1. Homework given more consistently

Two teachers specifically reported giving homework more consistently. Four teachers commented that now they expected to have homework completed, whereas before they were unable to enforce completion.

2. Homework checked more consistently; counts more on grade

For those teachers who were giving homework more consistently, it was counting more on the class grade. According to one teacher, "I now spot check homework and grade it whereas before I would give a pop test on it." This practice could benefit the student who has at least attempted the homework but does not know it well enough to pass a quiz. Two teachers reported that to manage the checking of homework they had begun allowing students to grade their own homework in class.

3. More teacher preparation of and explanation of homework assignments

The fact that all the teachers interviewed had a clearly defined personal homework policy in their classes was possibly the result of the administration's attention to homework through the call home program. One teacher expressed, "I will only call home for those assignments I can in good conscience call about; i.e., the lesson was taught well and I am sure the student was capable of doing it."

4. Teacher introduced strategies to insure homework completion

Many of the procedural changes in homework policy reported by teachers were designed specifically to encourage homework completion. In some cases these actions were taken to benefit the students and in other cases it was to reduce the calls to parents that might have to be made. These include:

- Allowing students to start homework in class. One teacher reported adopting this practice. Another teacher reported that other teachers were doing this more. Several teachers reported that they only called home for homework that was not attempted at all. As one teacher remarked, "They have to try hard not to do something - they usually have some time in class to do at least part of it."
- Having students complete forms if they didn't have their homework, sometimes with a written explanation as to why they didn't have it. This was seen as a deterrent, as the students disliked the paperwork, and it served as a management tool for the teacher. Four teachers reported this practice.
- Grade incentives to complete homework assignments. One teacher reported dropping the lowest quiz grade and adding a grade of 100 if all homework was turned in for that six week period.
- Asking students to call out their homework grades in class. This not only saved teacher time, but, according to one teacher, "It's embarrassing for a student to call out 'zero'."

There was no consensus from parents or students on whether there was more homework this year at Skyview or whether teacher homework policies had changed. One group of students who were influenced by the program agreed that homework was being explained in class more this year. For them, that was important. They felt the main reason they did not do homework was that it had not been explained well enough for them to do it or they were too far behind in class to know how.

Increased class sizes, rather than the homework program, may have been responsible for some of the changes in teacher homework policy or practice. One teacher reported giving less homework this year due to increased class sizes saying she could not handle grading and calling home for so many students.

Teacher Reaction to the Homework Program

Of the 25 faculty sampled, 20 (80%) reacted positively to the HEP. Out of this group of 20 teachers, 12 were positive without reservation. The other 8 were generally positive but expressed problems they had experienced in implementing it. Three teachers (12%) were ambivalent toward the program, they did not express an opinion one way or the other. Strong disapproval of the HEP was voiced by 2 (8%) of the teachers.

Most of the positive comments were simply that the program was working. Teachers liked the fact that their failure rates were dropping and they approved of the overall academic atmosphere at Skyview, of which the homework program was only a part. They liked the positive reactions they had received from parents, whose concern had sometimes made the difference in a student passing or failing. As one parent remarked, "There should be more of this personal contact and fewer notes home."

The primary complaint about the homework program was the amount of time it took for some teachers to call home (a problem that varied by the level of the students taught; honors teachers made very few calls). Although almost every teacher felt that the personal contact with parents was beneficial, eight teachers specifically stated that calling home for homework had been an enormous drain on their time and energy. Some of the reasons they gave for the difficulty were that parents were frequently difficult to reach, sometimes wanted to talk for a long time, may be in the middle of a family crisis, or the parents had difficulty communicating in English. Two teachers commented that increased class loads made calling more difficult. Also, the publicity given to the homework policy meant that students and parents expected the calls. One teacher remarked that this became a problem in maintaining credibility if a student should "slip through the cracks" and not be called.

Other reservations about the program were varied. One teacher thought it was causing students to resent homework more. Another felt that it reinforced dependent behavior in students who didn't do homework. One student group reiterated that point; they felt that the program worked on the assumption that students were immature and had to be told what to do. Several teachers reported that some parents felt high school students were old enough to make their own decision about homework. One teacher felt the program isolated some of the lowest achieving students. Another felt that teachers

were lowering their standards to reduce the failure rate and that students resented homework more.

Some reactions must be considered within the context of varying teacher attitudes toward teaching. Some teachers preferred uniform, schoolwide policies. Two specifically stated that they liked having administrative back-up for classroom practices ("Now I can expect to have homework turned in."), while two other teachers expressed a dislike of uniform rules ("Homework is a teacher's personal decision."). One teacher stated the administration discouraged referrals except for really serious matters. Three teachers said they were reluctant to send students to the principal for failure to do homework, preferring to handle the matter themselves.

Just as the innovation was changed by some teachers, some teachers' practices were changed by the innovation. Eleven of the 25 study teachers reported they had made some changes in their homework practices this year. In some cases teachers used the HEP as support for increasing the amount or importance of homework. Other teachers made adjustments to reduce or eliminate calls to parents.

Overall teacher reaction to the HEP was clearly on the positive side. Only 2 of the 25 teachers completely disapproved it.

Program Outcomes

Teacher Perceptions of Program Outcomes

To discover the influence of the HEP on students, teachers, parents, and students were interviewed to see how each group perceived its impact. Teachers identified two groups of students - those who had been affected in some way by the homework policy and those who apparently had not been affected. The latter group contained two distinctly different types of students, highly motivated students and highly unmotivated students. Many of the teachers of highly motivated students expressed the opinion that getting these students to complete homework assignments was not a problem because these students would complete assignments regardless of the school policy. The other group that was seemingly unaffected were the highly unmotivated students. Some teachers communicated instances when these students failed to complete assignments. On following up with a phone call to parents, these teachers reported a lack or absence of parental support. The attitude that teachers expressed was that once they failed to get parental support, they, in

effect, lost that student. Some teachers believed the highly unmotivated group was also not affected by the HEP, perhaps because a call home was not seen as a threat or as a motivating factor. Since none of the teachers had moved beyond the principal-call-home step of the HEP, it was impossible to know if the students might be reached through the final two steps of coming before school to complete homework or having a parent/principal conference.

There seemed to be general agreement among teachers about the type of students that had been most affected, those who were marginal in their classes. One teacher reported that her C- students were most helped. Another reported that her failing students were most helped by the policy. Several teachers felt that more students were trying to complete homework. Some teachers claimed that the improvement in homework was responsible for an increase in their students' overall grades.

Teachers were in general agreement that students overall were doing their homework because of apprehension about teachers and principals calling their parents to report on their homework progress. Terms used to describe these responses of the students were "apprehension," "fear of principal," "avoid confrontations with parents," "embarrassed," and "major threat."

Although the concerns cited above were the most prevalent, there were others worthy of note. A few teachers commented that they felt the program was positive in its effects on highly motivated students because they were even more conscious of their school work. One teacher said that even "A" students get their homework daily. In the past they might have been willing to skip assignments because they had high grades. One teacher stated that top students are working harder now because they see lower students doing better. An observation of several teachers was that the ninth and tenth grade students were the most affected grade levels for they were learning for the first time that homework was a serious requirement.

Student Perceptions of Program Outcomes

All students interviewed were aware of the HEP. Even students who had been identified as uninfluenced commented as to the undesirability of having a teacher or principal calling their parents. Even though most students were aware of the program, no real pattern developed as to how students saw the influence of the program on themselves. Instead there were many individual responses which are helpful in understanding student response to the HEP. The

following comments give an example of the variety of responses from the "influenced" students:

- If parents don't have influence on their kids, then the kids are not too concerned about parents being called.
- Now there is more copying of homework.
- Parents are demanding that kids do some kind of homework every night.
- Parent/child relationships are getting worse.
- If they are doing better on homework this year, it is because they have a teacher who's explaining it better. If they are doing worse this year, it's because the teacher isn't explaining it well.
- Because my mother got mad since my father was called, now I always do it. My dad watches me.
- We don't care about the homework policy and our teachers don't care either.
- You want to do your homework so your parents aren't called.

The groups of students identified as uninfluenced by the HEP shared these comments with the researchers:

- My god, they're going to call my parents.
- The teachers have more control.
- Students are already set in their ways and are not going to change their patterns.
- It depends on parents whether the students change or not.
- It's good that the principal calls because it means that it's really important that parents get their kids "on the ball."
- Drop out prospectives might drop out because of the added stress.
- The program should have started in junior high school. "You can't just drop this program on us!"
- In honors classes they don't call because they trust the students. But they call in regular classes.
- Kids don't want the principal to call home.

Parents' Perceptions

The final component that was explored was the opinion of parents on the effect of the program on their children. The majority of parents interviewed was aware that there was a homework program. Most of the parents felt that their children were trying harder to do their homework compared to their past

efforts. A couple of parents related that this had seemed to bring about a general improvement in their child's overall grades. These opinions were the only patterns of influence on children identified in the parent interviews.

Based on the interview data for all subject groups it was apparent that the HEP was having some affect on the general school population. However, the degree of the affect and whether it was positive or negative was not so clearly determined. From the data collected, it would not be prudent to make substantial claims as to the influence on the student body as a whole.

Transferability of the HEP

As this study was designed, it was anticipated that the HEP might be considered for use in other high schools if it seemed to have positive value in Skyview High School. Therefore, the interviews included questions to ascertain what factors the interviewees felt were necessary for the program to be functional in another setting.

The factor mentioned most often as being essential was a school principal who would support the program and be willing to make the calls to parents. Some of the comments made by teachers emphasized this point.

"It would work as long as the principal is as dedicated to carrying through and getting involved as our principal is."

"I must say what is the key - it is the principal who is very strong and backs us up. He follows through thus instilling an element of fear in students."

"The teacher needs a principal that will take the time to do this. You need the back-up of the principal."

"It has worked here and definitely because of the principal. He is a 'no-bones-about-it, this is what we'll do' kind of leader. That is offensive to many people but it has made the changes."

"It works because the administrators are willing to get involved. It wouldn't work if the administrators did not follow through."

A second factor mentioned by the teachers was teachers.

"Teachers have to accept it and make it work. The principal can't change "F" rates but teachers can."

"Teacher support is necessary. When everyone works together it can work."

"This program can work anywhere that teachers are concerned."

Another group of teachers believed the program could work anywhere and did not specify any particular factors they felt necessary to its success.

"If it can work here it can work anywhere."

"It can work anywhere. My daughter is a teacher in an elementary school and she is using it."

"It will work in any school where there is a concentrated effort."

Several teachers issued cautions about use of the program elsewhere.

"In a school with a lot of low-level students it probably would not work."

"There are faculties that would not say 'OK, I'll do it.' They would rise up in open rebellion and say 'there is no way we are going to do this.' Different personality in leadership and a different group personality in the faculty are the factors."

Students, like teachers, also mentioned the principal most frequently as the key factor.

"Our principal is more enthusiastic about calling home."

"The principal supports it and does call home."

"The principal must be involved with students."

"The principal cares and gets rid of problems very well."

"Our principal makes the difference here."

"Academic mentality that our principal instills at Skyview."

"It works because we have a strong principal. We know he'll do it."

"Our principal scares people into doing their homework. He is a nice guy but people are afraid of him."

Two students credited teachers with making the program work while another two believed that students made the program work. Several students believed it would work elsewhere but named no specific factors. Some of the comments made by students are worthy of note.

"It's working but its a program that treats students as if they are immature, but maybe the ones it's aimed at are immature."

"You mean we are the only ones doing it. That's not fair. It should be put into all high schools."

"The decision about homework should be left up to students. Parents shouldn't be called."

Most parents felt the program was working but for the most part they gave no specific reasons why they felt it was working. Three parents did mention that they thought the key factor was the school and parents working together.

From the available data it can be concluded that no one factor is solely responsible for making the HEP functional. It requires the effort and cooperation of all involved parties but especially important is the enthusiasm and support of the school administration.

Homework Practices at Skyview High School

In a previous section there was a discussion of changes teachers had made in their homework practices. This section presents more details about the homework practices in Skyview High School.

The factors considered in determining the homework practices of each teacher were: a) frequency of homework assignments, b) amount of homework assigned, c) the kind of homework, d) how the teacher checked if the homework was done, and e) the value placed on homework as a whole. Interestingly, the responses to these questions related to those five factors varied considerably in all respects. Every teacher described a different way of handling homework in his or her class, so to report on each teacher's practice would entail describing twenty-five different procedures. As a result, this analysis presents only an overall view of the homework practices at Skyview, in relation to the five factors identified as descriptors of the homework practices.

Frequency of Homework Assignments

The frequency with which homework was assigned varied from none to five times a week but most teachers did assign some homework. In classes requiring special equipment, such as typing or computer classes, it was less likely that there would be homework.

Teachers assigned homework two, three, or four times a week, depending on what they were teaching. Some indicated they had set days each week when they assigned homework. For example, some teachers said they assigned homework on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Others specified assigning homework every day except for test days or Fridays. Most math, algebra, and trigonometry

teachers assigned homework every night. So the frequency of homework assignments varied considerably among teachers.

Amount of Homework Assigned

The amount of homework assigned per night also varied quite extensively and was somewhat related to the assignment itself. In the math department, some teachers specified the amount in terms of number of problems or amount of time it would take the students to complete the task. One teacher said she gave about 25-30 math problems per night and that it would take the students about one and a half hours to do them. Teachers in other departments stated that it would take their students about 30 minutes to an hour to complete their homework assignments. Many of the teachers throughout all the departments said that they give class time at the end of the period for the students to begin their homework in school, so the amount of time spent doing homework at home was reduced. Overall, the amount of homework depended on what the assignment entailed.

Kind of Homework Assigned

The types of assignments were, of course, dependent on the subject each teacher taught. For example, many of the social studies, government, English, language arts, and foreign language teachers assigned a lot of reading, vocabulary, grammar exercises, and short question and answer exercises from the textbook. Most of the math department teachers assigned drills and practice problems from the textbook also. The science department teachers usually made students responsible for research projects, long range assignments, lab project write ups, or getting materials ready for a lab experiment the next day. Studying for tests was also considered homework in all of the classes throughout the departments.

Checking Homework

Once again, great variety was found in teacher practices. Some teachers walked the classroom, checking assignments to see if they were done or not. Others simply asked for notification of those who had not done homework. In these two styles, homework was not graded, but credit was given for having done it. In other classes, teachers spot-checked, which meant that some days they would check to see if homework was completed and other days they would not. Some teachers not only spot-checked, but they also graded the papers that day. In spot-checking, or spot-grading, students never knew when the teacher would ask for the homework.

In some classes, teachers let students interchange their homework and the students graded each other's work. Yet, in other classes, the teacher collected all the homework and graded it her/himself.

On the other end of the scale, there were a few teachers who did not ask about homework at all, but maintained they could tell whether students had done it or not by the way in which they answered questions in class, participated in class discussions, or performed on tests.

Value Placed on Homework

The greatest variation within any given homework practice was in regards to the value placed on homework. At one end of the scale were the teachers who did not check or grade their students' homework. For these teachers, homework had little or no value in terms of grade weight.

Teachers who checked and graded homework were more likely to make it weigh more towards the students' final grade. In most classes homework accounted about 20 to 30% of the total final (six week) grade. One teacher reported that homework counted for 50% of the students' final grade. Although some teachers did not mention percentages, the importance of completing the homework had a major bearing on determination of the final grade. For example, one teacher stated that she checked to see if students had done their homework but she did not grade it. A student who had checks for all homework in a six week period got the equivalent of a 100% on a test, plus being permitted to drop the lowest test score. Another teacher graded the homework every day, and at the end of the week averaged the five grades to get one final homework weekly grade which was the only one she recorded in her gradebook. That score counted as a test grade which counted towards the final

grade in that grading period. A student who did not do his/her work would get a 0% for that day, thus, their weekly average would be low. Other teachers averaged homework grades recorded throughout the six weeks to come up with a major test score which was then counted towards the final grade. One teacher stated that in her class students who did not do their homework did not perform well on the daily quizzes, which counted for half of the total grade. Even though homework was not directly affecting the final grade, it did have some influence on another score that did affect the final grade.

Another variation in the value placed on homework resulted when teachers combined homework with daily work, and sometimes with lab performance, to come up with a major test score that averaged into the final six-week grade. Another teacher gave equal value to homework grades, tests, and daily grades.

Relating Homework Practice to Research Findings

The great variations among the homework practices of the teachers in this study prompted a review of the literature to ascertain what are considered effective homework practices. Those practices found in Skyview were then compared with findings from the literature. Five major issues were identified from the literature search.

Issue 1 - Homework or No Homework - In the study school most teachers did assign some kind of homework but clearly there were differences in the frequency, difficulty, and nature of the assignments. The practice of regular homework assignments seems to be rooted more in tradition than any clearly articulated rationale or policy on the part of the teachers or school. Some support for this tradition might be found in the claim that regularly assigned homework contributes to student achievement (Walberg, Paschal, Weinstein, 1985). However, others claim that if homework is to serve a useful purpose the assignments must meet certain standards and conditions (Turvey, 1986; LaConte, 1981; Foyle & Bailey, 1985). Assignments should extend classroom learning, increase student interest and motivation, be clearly explained, and appropriate to the ability of the student. Very few teachers encompassed all of these qualities in their practices.

Issue 2 - Time Requirements for Homework - Some teachers in the study school assigned daily homework that required 45-60 minutes per night while others made assignments that could be completed in class or required minimal time at home. The daily amount of time an individual student might spend on

homework depended entirely on the "luck of the draw." A student who happened to have several teachers who gave lengthy daily assignments may have several hours of homework each night. Other students may have homework irregularly and much of it may be completed in school. There were no mechanisms in place to control or guide assignments across the faculty.

From their review of the literature, Hill, Spencer, Alston, and Fitzgerald (1986) determined that approximately 60 minutes per day was the average recommended time allocation for homework. On the other hand, these authors found that in those districts that had stated policies regarding homework, the average time recommended was 105 minutes per day. Reports from high school students indicated they spend four to five hours per week on homework (Walberg & Shanahan, 1983).

Issue 3 - Grading of Homework - Some writers maintain that to be effective in promoting student learning, homework should be regularly graded (Foyle & Bailey, 1985; Bard, 1958). Others believe it is important to give recognition to completed homework but grading all assignments is not a necessity (LaConte, 1981). Approximately 80% of the teachers in this study who assigned homework did recognize it in some way but a much smaller percentage actually graded it. Whether graded or just recognized, homework assignments contributed anywhere from 20-50% to the course grade awarded students.

Issue 4 - Purposes and Characteristics of Effective Practices - Homework has been classified according to four distinct purposes: preparation, practice, extension, and creativity (Lee & Pruitt, 1979). A few of the teachers in this study stated clearly their purpose for homework but most did not express a specific purpose. Judging from the nature of the actual homework it was apparent that most assignments served the practice or preparation purpose. Homework for these purposes can contribute to student achievement (Foyle & Bailey, 1986) but to do so the assignments should meet certain criteria. Practice type exercises should be individualized and based on the progress of the student (LaConte, 1981). No instances of this happening were reported by the teachers. Preparation exercises should be preceded by very specific instructions, explanations and guidance, and the purpose made clear to students. Reports from students who were also interviewed as a part of the study indicated that only infrequently were they given this type of information.

During the study another homework practice of interest was noted. There was an apparent tendency to relate homework assignments to the type of students in the class. Students in advanced classes or elective classes tended to be assigned more homework than students in the basic or remedial classes. Also, the homework for advanced students was more likely to require higher order thinking skills than the routine practice exercises assigned to low achieving students. The reason given for these differential practices was that the lower students would not do it anyway. While that position may represent reality it denies the research that shows that homework can increase achievement, and the research showing that high teacher expectations lead to increased student achievement. In the low achieving classes, students are determining teacher expectations rather than teachers establishing expectations for students. Such a practice seems self defeating.

Issue 5 - Homework and Student Achievement - This has to be the most important of the issues surrounding homework. Based on research evidence some claim that homework does have a positive influence on achievement (Walberg, Paschal & Weinstein, 1985; Paschal, Weinstein & Walberg, 1984). Others claim the research does not justify such a claim (Barber, 1986). Still others believe that homework can have a positive influence under certain conditions (Foyle & Bailey, 1986; Turvey, 1986). Some of the conditions mentioned are that it be assigned and collected on a regular basis and graded and returned promptly. Also the purposes must be clear to students and it should be motivating to them. Walberg, Paschal, and Weinstein (1985) found from their research analysis that even if homework is assigned without teacher feedback it can have a beneficial effect on achievement. However, the effects are greater when the work is graded or receives some kind of feedback. In the studies that formed the basis for these findings, achievement was usually determined by scores on standardized achievement tests or criterion-referenced tests.

Educational Significance

This study in one high school did not develop information that would either confirm or deny the above research findings, but it did raise several questions about the relationship between homework and student learning and grades. One fact is clear, homework does significantly influence course grades, the ones that are the basis for grade point averages, class standings,

honors and awards, and other factors that may significantly influence a student's future. Homework contributed anywhere from 20-50% to the course grade a student was awarded. This was true even in those cases where the homework was not graded or checked for accuracy but checked only for completion. It seemed that for some teachers the unstated purpose of homework assignments was not to enhance learning but to support or even inflate student grades. This was most evident in the one case where students could get the equivalent of one test score of 100 points plus dropping a low test score for completing all homework - work that was neither graded nor checked for accuracy. Granted, these practices may motivate students to complete their homework but is the use of homework to inflate grades a purpose and practice secondary schools wish to sanction and encourage?

Beyond the impact of homework on grades, there is the issue of its relationship to learning. How can teachers know if students are learning from homework if it is not graded or evaluated in some way? There is a real possibility that students are doing many things wrong and without any corrective feedback may actually be engaging in negative learning. Even if the work is graded it is questionable how much students might learn if they do not understand the purpose or they require so much assistance outside of school to complete it they do not understand what they have done. Students reported they had experienced these conditions. If the intent of homework is to increase student learning, rather than influencing grades, then there is a need for serious reconsideration of current homework practices.

At this time in our nation when school success is judged by scores on achievement tests it is understandable that practice is the purpose served by a majority of homework assignments. Also, it is easier to hold students accountable for this type of assignment. Nevertheless, if there is a desire to improve learning more attention should be given to the other homework purposes: preparation, extension, and creativity. Assignments fitting those purposes would prepare students to maximize future learning opportunities or learn how to apply what is learned to new situations or how to synthesize what has been learned to generate new knowledge or viewpoints. Only a few teachers in the study school assigned homework for these latter three purposes and then only in advanced classes.

Concluding Remarks

Go into any high school and you will find established guidelines for all facets of school operation from the curriculum to scheduling to expectations for student and faculty behavior and dress to cafeteria procedures. Yet, in the midst of all this structure this study suggests that the practice of homework operates with few if any meaningful schoolwide guidelines or expectations. Here is a traditional practice that consumes many hours of student and teacher time and is the source of much conflict in schools and homes, yet, it continues on with little control or structure. This situation should be changed immediately, homework practices must be organized and guided in such a way that educators and parents can be assured that they meet the needs of students and serve the purposes of education.

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